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Rick Rupkey II, vice president of Tucson, AZ-based University Termite and Pest Control, notes that the pest management industry has a unique problem when it comes to marketing: no tangibles.

"When we do our job right, we give our customers nothing — no odors, residues, insects or rodents," he explains. "It's completely unlike just about any service that consumers purchase. A landscaper can show off his work; the pool service can prove the pool is clean. We don't have that luxury. This makes it easy for people to offer to charge less for that 'nothing,' and it's equally easy for customers to take that 'nothing' for granted."

This situation particularly came to light when University threw its hat into the ring to bid on a 144-building homeowner's association. As luck would have it, the association's general pest control and termite contracts (with separate companies) were up at the same time. However, out of about 10 companies bidding on one or the other, University was the only firm bidding for both.

Rupkey points out that because it's the association making the decision, not the individual homeowners, residents take less ownership in the service. They expect the company to do more and for them to be required to do less.

"We said, 'Let's do something unique here,'" Rupkey recalls. "We've got a large group of people who need accountability for the service. They need to know that somebody has been there, that they've done something tangible, and that they've recorded it in such a way that everyone has access to it. Traditional reporting, such as logbooks or leaving paperwork on the doorstep, wasn't going to accomplish that because you have a lot of different personalities and schedules, including 'snowbirds' who only spend their winters in Arizona, returning back East during the hotter months of the year. So we needed a central depository to track what we've done, and we wanted the information to be verifiable in a way so the customers were happy that they were indeed getting what they were paying for."

Rupkey knew that SecureChoice would fit that bill. 

Branding the service

University had recently begun offering its Signature Service program with SecureChoice as its centerpiece:

- The SecureChoice Knowledge Management System, powered by Electronic Pest Management (ePM), offers a handheld computer system to guide technicians through a barcode program to ensure he or she has checked every monitoring station, done a complete inspection and addressed any other pest concerns on each stop.
- The system allows the service ticket to be printed immediately onsite, featuring a timestamp of each action taken during the visit.
- The SecureChoice Multiplex Stations are equipped to handle both

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- rodents and insects, and feature barcodes for easy service.
- Customers are able to view the results of the service visit online within 24 hours. (Rupkey notes that in the case of the homeowner association, the board decided on how much information would be accessible to individual residents — some wanted full disclosure while others preferred not to be bombarded with such information.)
- The Signature Service features "No-Hassle Billing," where the company simply charges a credit card monthly instead of using a complicated invoicing process.
- University's Signature Service Plus program extends to termite coverage, which also uses SecureChoice components. Using the in-ground SecureChoice Monitoring Stations, which have barcodes and methane detectors to check for activity, technicians are able to spot-treat as needed. The stations also detect and control insects, for added coverage.
- The program is designed for six visits a year, with each visit designed to address a specific, seasonally driven pest need. This makes customers less likely to cancel in the cooler months. An interior termite inspection is done between December and January; hidden spaces such as storage rooms, crawlspaces and attics are inspected between February and March; pest-proofing for ant and dooryard pests (crickets, scorpions, etc.) is done between April and May, and again in August/September; scorpion and cockroach baiting and exclusion is done between June and July; and rodent exclusion is done between October and November.

A winning offer

By offering the Signature Service program, University won both the termite and general pest contracts of the association with ease. The association was most impressed by the substance of the program, Rupkey notes.

"It gave us something tangible onsite that people could look at when we weren't there and say, 'Aha, something is being done here,'" he adds. "We knew we were going to do a quarter of the facility each month, and it gave some residents a chance to see what we were doing and what to look forward to."

The reporting factor was key, as well. Rupkey notes that the winter-only residents could keep tabs on the service several states away simply by logging in online.

"The flexibility of the system allows you to handle both the person who wants to know everything and the person who just wants it done without knowing all the technical stuff," he adds. "The ePM program also allows us to give verifiable assurance that the service was done."

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Easy implementation

University divided the 144 buildings of condos and common areas (pool room, laundry facility, party center, etc.) into quadrants. Sanitation was not a problem, but infestations to varying degrees of scorpions, rodents, crickets and desert subterranean termites (*Heterotermes aureus* [Snyder]) were creeping in. The termite species is known for its tunneling, so any broken barrier leaves a structure vulnerable. Rupkey notes the flexibility of the termite stations — no rigid requirements for a grid placement — freed his technicians to place stations where they'd get hits.

"We also accomplished insect baiting with these stations, so we had to be creative about where we placed them," he explains. "It involved some brain work, and it was one of the things we really liked because it made sense. It made sense to customers, too, when you explained it that way. There's nothing magical about placing things every eight feet."

Implementation was done over four months, and using a termite technician to place the stations helped because they were pros at installing the stations into the rocky, hard soil quickly. Rupkey loves the taupe color of the stations because they blend in with the Arizona landscape.

"In areas where we knew there was higher traffic, we covered them with rock, put patio blocks on them, etc., to make them less obvious," he adds.

University used two termite technicians and one general pest technician to install the system. There is now one technician responsible for the entire development, servicing one quadrant a month. He and the three other technicians implementing Signature Service are certified in both termite and pest control, with additional University technicians on deck to also become dually certified.

"It ends up being a quarterly service, which in the past has been a real challenge to provide in Arizona because we go such wild extremes in weather — it rains in sheets, or it's scorching hot," notes Rupkey. "A lot gel baits, for example, just wouldn't last 30 or 60 days here. But what's great about the system is the flexibility of what products we use in the stations."

The program is 99% exterior application, with an additional charge for interior work as needed.

Other doors opened

Aside from Tucson and Phoenix, Arizona's largely rural population spreads out across the state. Rupkey believes the SecureChoice program has paved the way for his company to enter some smaller yet profitable marketplaces that before had kept with local service only. Although the cost of doing business in these areas were lower than in the city, the prices had to be lowered, too, in order to compete.

"In Tucson, you can get a \$30 monthly service fee, while in some of the rural communities you get a \$17 fee. That was frustrating to us, because we had no way of driving the prices up," he recalls. "When we started offering this program, we could literally quadruple customer rates. They were getting more for their money — one-stop shopping. I was able to get past the objections of 'I can call Sam or Bob or you, and you're all going to give me the same thing, so what difference does it make?' It gave us something different that impressed people. And it allowed us to take those \$17 monthly customers and turn them into \$90 every-other-month customers."

While only about 5% of University's customers are on the Signature Service program, they account for 15% of the company's profits. Rupkey plans on sending his sales staff out with technicians during the historically slower months of November and December to present the service to all accounts while the tech is performing winter service. 

Rupkey also sees the domino effect of retaining employees via the higher commission that the program yields: "I can offer someone \$60,000 a year to do what other companies are only paying \$24,000 for, so it's going to be a lot harder for that person to walk away."

At press time, University was on the second cycle of treatment for the homeowners association, and Rupkey couldn't be more pleased by the results.

"We had a ton of people requesting inside service on the first go-through because they hadn't had much before," he concludes. "We're not getting that so much the second time around because we've since done proactive treatment around the perimeter. It's working really well." **PC**





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